CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Triangle Communications Molt Fiber to the Home (FTTH) Upgrade Easement
Proposed Implementation Date:	Spring/Summer 2021
Proponent:	Triangle Communications Assn, Inc.
Location:	South ½ of South ½ of Section 16, Township 1 North, Range 23 East (Common Schools Trust)
County:	Yellowstone County

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The Proponent, Triangle Communications Assn, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.), is applying for a 20' wide easement on a parcel of State Trust Land in Yellowstone county for the installation of underground telecommunication lines as described as South ½ of the South ½ of Section 16, Township 1 North, Range 23 East. The proposed 20' wide, and approximate 575 foot long, (0.263 acre) easement would be located along the north side of Mountain View Road (See Exhibit A).

The easement is part of a larger project where Triangle Communications is upgrading their telecommunications lines from their existing Molt Exchange serving the Molt, MT rural area. The project consists of replacing outdated existing copper services with fiber optic lines to provide Fiber to the Home (FTTH) service in remote areas. This parcel is located approximately 10 miles northwestwardly of Billings and adjacent to State Highway 532, a.k.a. Buffalo Trail Road.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

No formal public scoping was performed by DNRC for this proposed project. Triangle Communications obtained a Settlement of Damages form from the grazing lessee.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

No other government permits are needed.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Issue a 20' wide easement to Triangle Communications for the underground installation of fiber optic cable on the South ½ of South ½ of Section 16, Township 1 North, Range 23 East in Yellowstone County.

No Action Alternative: Deny the request by Triangle Communications to issue a proposed 20' wide easement for fiber optic cable installation in Yellowstone County on the South ½ of South ½ of Section 16, Township 1 North, Range 23 East in Yellowstone County.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:
Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

The route proposed in the easement is generally located along the north side of Mountain View Road, a private road, a quarter mile east of Buffalo Trail Road, a state highway. The fiber optic cable is proposed to be installed using the direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers that cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. Based on the proposed action and relatively short disturbance time for cable installation, no significant adverse impacts to geology and soils are expected by implementing the proposed action.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:
Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

The proposed easement does not cross any surface water. No significant adverse impacts to water quality, quantity or distribution are anticipated by implementing the proposed action.

6. AIR QUALITY:
What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

There may be short-term isolated impacts from the equipment exhaust that is used to install the fiber optic cable. No significant adverse impacts to air quality are expected by implementing the proposed action.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:
What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

The cable is proposed to be installed using direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers that cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. The area disturbed by the trenching activity and from vehicle travel could have short term impacts on vegetation. No significant long term adverse impacts to vegetative cover, quantity or quality are expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:
Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

A variety of big game (antelope, deer, elk and mountain lions), small mammals, raptors, songbirds and turkeys may traverse the subject section. The proposed project activities could temporarily disrupt wildlife movement and patterns. Due to the relatively short project duration and nature no significant adverse impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:
Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database indicated the following seven species of concern found for this parcel: Golden Eagle, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Greater-Sage Grouse, Pinyon Jay, Ferrunginous Hawk, Sharp-tailed Grouse, and Canada Lynx. There are also potential species of concern that have the

possibility of having habitats in the area. None of the species listed above were observed on the parcel, just in the general area. This section is located within Greater Sage Grouse General Habitat and Triangle Communications is working on completing a consultation with the Montana Sage Grouse Conservation Program before work can begin.

Due to the nature of the proposed action, the installation of underground fiber optic cable, it is not expected to have a significant long-term effect on any of the species identified on or around this parcel. The surface disturbance will be temporary and located parallel and adjacent to an existing private road.

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10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

No cultural and paleontological resource inventories have been documented nor identified in the area of potential effect on state land. The proposed project will have *No Effect* to *Antiquities* as defined under the Montana State Antiquities Act. Formal reports of findings are available through the DNRC and the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer. No additional archaeological or paleontological investigative work is recommended.

Additionally, during a site visit on 7 January 2021 by Area Planner Joe Holzwarth, a visual inspection was performed, especially on areas outside of previously disturbed areas, and no cultural or paleontological resources were identified.

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11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

The proposed action would result in the installation of underground fiber optic cable adjacent and parallel to an existing pirvate road. Once the easement areas are rehabbed from the installation disturbance, the only indication that there is an underground fiber optic line would be from any above-ground warning markers. Therefore, no significant adverse impact to aesthetics is expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No significant adverse impacts to environmental resources of land, water, air or energy are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

There are no other known studies or future actions are planned for this Trust land parcel.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:
Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

No significant adverse impacts to human health and safety would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:
Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

The location of the easement does not traverse any crop lands. No significant adverse impacts to industrial, commercial and agricultural activities and production would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:
Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

The proposed action will have no significant impact on the quantity and distribution of employment.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:
Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

The proposed action will have no adverse impact on tax revenue.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:
Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

The implementation of the proposed alternative will not generate any additional demands on governmental services.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:
List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

Implementation of the proposed alternative will not conflict with any locally adopted plans.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:
Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

The subject parcel does have legal public access via a county road (Bermes Road) and state road (Buffalo Trail Road). The fiber optic cable installation is expected to occur in the Spring/Summer of 2021 (weather dependent) and could overlap spring turkey season. Impacts due to installation should be minimal as the easements run parallel to existing roads or highways and installation will be of a relatively short duration. The implementation of the proposed alternative is not expected to have a long-term adverse impact on recreational use of these Trust land parcels.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:
Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

No significant adverse impacts to density and distribution of population and housing would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:
Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

There are no native, unique or traditional lifestyles or communities in the vicinity that would be impacted by the proposed alternative.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:
How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

The proposed alternative will not have a significant adverse impact on cultural uniqueness or diversity.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:
Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

The Common Schools Trust Permanent Fund will benefit by getting a one-time fee of $130 from Triangle Communications for the purchase of the easement on this Trust parcel.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	**Name:**	Joe Holzwarth	**Date:**	22 January 2021
	Title:	Area Planner, Southern Land Office		

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The proposed alternative has been selected and it is recommended that a permanent 20' easement, containing 0.263 acres, be granted to Triangle Communications for the purpose of installing underground fiber optic cable on the following Trust land parcels in Yellowstone County: South ½ of South ½ of Section 16, Township 1 North, Range 23 East (Common Schools Trust).

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

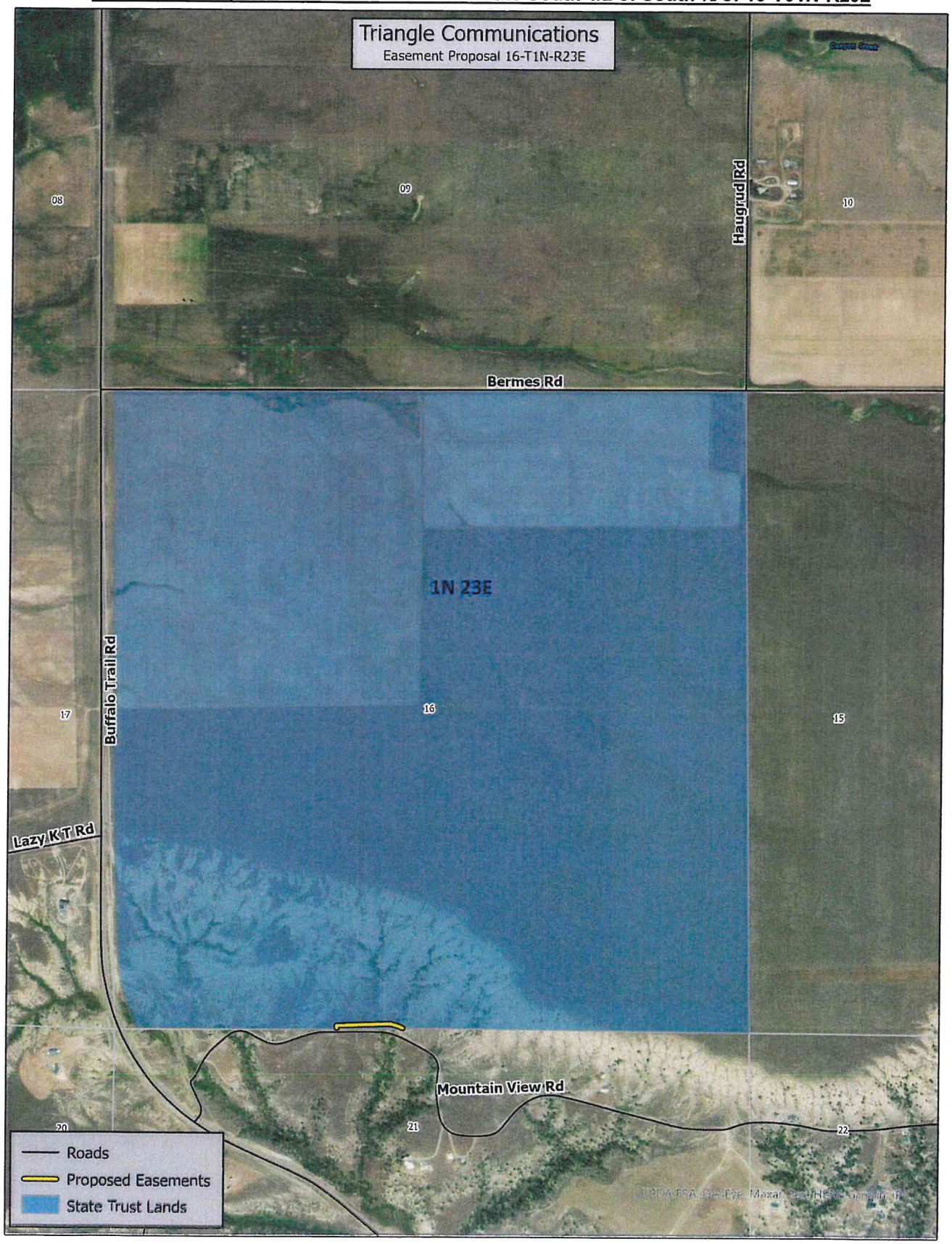
The potential for significant adverse impacts to the Trust lands listed above are minimal due to the nature of the proposed action which would entail the issuing of the easements and installation of underground fiber optic cable. The installation and disturbance is expected to completed in a short time-frame. The easement is located adjacent to and parallel to Mountain View Road, an existing private road. There are no natural features that could produce adverse impacts or species of concern occupying the parcels that are expected to be impacted by implementing the proposed action.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

☐ EIS ☐ More Detailed EA ☒ No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	**Name:**	Jeff Bollman
	Title:	Area Manager, Southern Land Office
Signature:	Jeff Bollman	**Date:** 1/22/21

Exhibit A – Proposed Easement location on the South 1/2 of South ½ of 16-T01N-R23E



Triangle Telephone Cooperative, dba
TRIANGLE COMMUNICATIONS
PO BOX 1140
HAVRE, MT 59501-1140
406-394-7507

PLEASE DETACH AND RETAIN

No. 82102

Date: 12/16/2020

DATE	INVOICE	DESCRIPTION	GROSS	NET
12/15/2020	20201216102752	APPLICATION	50.00	50.00
		Totals:	50.00	50.00

View looking west on Mountain View Road

View looking east on Mountain View Road